

AMERICA'S DEADLIEST

The true story of the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900 BY

VOCABULARY

devouring: quickly and completely destroying

formidable: very powerful or strong

predictions: statements about what someone thinks will happen in the future

storm surge: a rising of the sea caused by hurricane winds

wreckage: pieces of things that have been destroyed

Galveston, Texas, was drowning.

It was September 8, 1900, and the city was being torn to pieces by a violent hurricane.

Thousands of people were dead.

Harry Maxson, 14, stood at the window of his house. Like an angry beast, the ocean was **devouring** his neighborhood, swallowing up trees and tearing houses apart. Harry's ears hurt from the sound of the screaming wind.

Then Harry heard another sound.

"Help me!"



HARRY
MAXSON



VIDEO 1

VIDEO 2

GO TO
WEB VIEW

DISASTER

LAUREN TARSHIS

A woman was in danger. She was calling from somewhere outside.

Harry could barely swim. How could he help anyone?

“Please! Come and save us!” the woman cried.

Harry took a breath. He had to rescue that woman, even if it cost him his life.



PAUSE AND THINK: What was causing the damage in Harry’s neighborhood?

The Richest City

Before that day, Harry had every reason to feel blessed. He had a happy family and plenty of friends. With its grand homes and white sand beaches, Galveston was the richest and most important city in Texas.

However, because the city sat between the Gulf of Mexico and Galveston Bay, it flooded easily. During major storms, waves rose up from both bodies of water and transformed city streets into rushing streams. That’s what was happening on the windy and rainy morning of September 8.



WATER ALL AROUND Galveston sits between the Gulf of Mexico and Galveston Bay. This caused the city to flood easily during the Great Galveston Hurricane.

A GLITTERING CITY Before the storm, Galveston was one of the liveliest and most beautiful cities in America. Some called it “the New York City” of the Gulf.

But the people of Galveston weren’t especially concerned—in fact, thousands of people gathered at the beach to cheer the crashing waves.

was so unreliable, the residents of Galveston were in terrible danger. They were simply unaware that a powerful and treacherous hurricane was barreling toward their beautiful city—until it was too late.



PAUSE AND THINK: Why did Galveston flood so easily?



PAUSE AND THINK: What makes hurricanes so dangerous?

The Biggest Killer

What nobody understood was that this was no ordinary storm. Galveston would soon face one of nature’s most **formidable** forces: a hurricane.

Hurricanes form over oceans. They can drop trillions of gallons of rain, and their powerful winds can shatter buildings and lift trains off tracks. These massive, swirling storms have killed more people in America than any other type of natural disaster.

In the days leading up to the Galveston hurricane, weather experts knew that a serious storm was heading toward the United States—but they didn’t know exactly where it would hit. Because scientists at the time didn’t have technology that would allow them to track storms, their **predictions** were usually inaccurate.

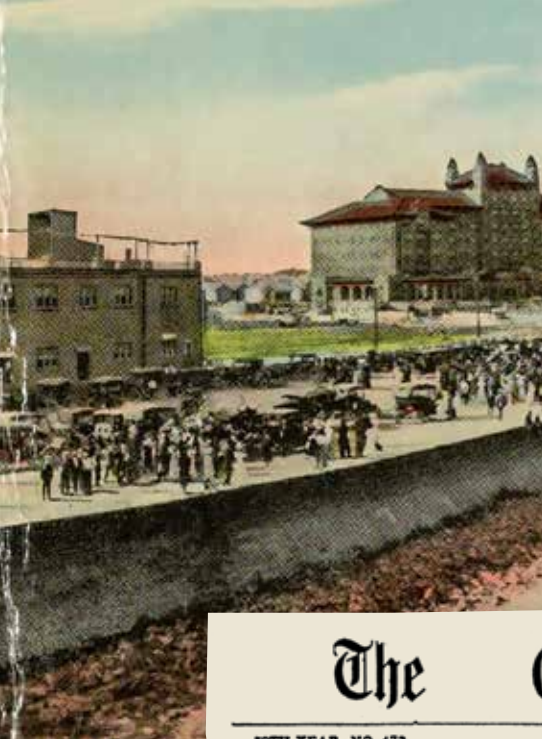
Because the science of predicting the weather

The Raging Sea

As the hours passed, the storm increased in strength and destroyed hundreds of buildings. Harry’s house was the sturdiest in the neighborhood, so his mother had invited in anyone who needed help.

Around 7:30 p.m., the winds shifted. A 15-foot-high **storm surge** rushed in from the Gulf of Mexico, turning the entire city into a raging sea. Houses, schools, and churches crumbled.

By midnight, Harry’s home was the only one in his neighborhood that hadn’t been washed away. It was crowded with terrified neighbors. “The house was so full, and there was so much worry,” Harry wrote. “There were people praying on their knees.”



TORN TO PIECES
After the storm, survivors found a scene they could barely believe. Their city's grand homes and buildings had been knocked over or wiped away.

The Galveston Daily News.

59TH YEAR—NO 173. GALVESTON, TEXAS, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1900. ESTABLISHED 1842

STORY OF THE GREAT DISASTER AT GALVESTON



PAUSE AND THINK: What happened after the winds shifted?

Daring Rescue

That's when Harry went into the kitchen and heard the woman outside calling for help. "I decided to get some good swimmers and go out and rescue her," Harry wrote.

They followed the woman's voice and finally found her standing on the roof of a house. Inside were 36 people, including 13 children and babies.

The house was floating in the water, and the wind was ripping it to pieces. But over the next hour, Harry and his neighbors managed to lead everyone through the water to safety. Harry's mother welcomed them all to their house.

By 1:30 a.m., there were 140 people—as well as dogs, cats, and birds—at Harry's house. People sat together crying, praying, and waiting for the hurricane to end.



PAUSE AND THINK: How did Harry and his neighbors help save lives?

Lucky to Survive

"By Sunday morning, the sun was shining," Harry wrote. "But the water was still 3 feet deep in the streets. What a wreck it left."

Throughout Galveston, there was nothing but devastation. At least 8,000 people had perished. The Great Galveston Hurricane is the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history.

It took more than a year for all the **wreckage** to be cleared away. The city was gradually rebuilt, and a huge wall was constructed to protect it from future storms—but it is no longer the richest and most important city in Texas.

Harry understood how fortunate he and his family had been to survive the hurricane. He grew up to be a business leader and lived to be 82. According to Harry's grandson Peter, Harry enjoyed life but never forgot the 1900 hurricane. "He told his story every Thanksgiving," Peter says. •



PAUSE AND THINK: What is Galveston like today?